Covenant Network Luncheon
PCUSA General Assembly
San Jose, California
June 23, 2008
John Buchanan

Two Presbyterian families sat together in a pew in a United Church of Christ on a bright sunny Sunday morning in Southern California. They were there for the baptism of a granddaughter. Both grandfathers are Presbyterian ministers. Both grandmothers are faithful, thoughtful Presbyterians. Their son and daughter, parents of the baby who would be baptized that morning, are happily not stereotypical P.K.'s, but intentional Christians and active church members. She was on the Pastor Nominating Committee. He chairs the Property Committee. They do something amazingly "counter culture" in Southern California, these two Presbyterian young adults do: they get up on Sunday morning, dress their daughters in their Sunday best and, of all things, go to church. They drive fifteen miles — to their United Church of Christ, even though there is a Presbyterian Church a few blocks from where they live. The United Church of Christ, (not the Presbyterian Church (USA)), is the denomination into which these baptized, confirmed, committed, lifelong Presbyterians are having their infant daughter baptized.

Now, having a child baptized in a congregation of the United Church of Christ is not a bad thing. In fact, it's a good thing, except for the reason. The reason is that in each of these thoroughly Presbyterian families there is a person who is not welcome in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Both of these persons are young, bright, reasonably committed Presbyterians, and the official position of their church is that their sexual orientation and expression is so singularly sinful that it singles them out and disqualifies them from the full rights of membership in the Presbyterian Church. They can, of course, be members of the Church. But there is an asterisk beside their names. They cannot serve their church as Deacons, Elders or Ministers, unless they repent of sexual expression that both have struggled with for years and with the help of supportive families and therapists have come to accept as profoundly a part of who they are as children of God, as natural to them as breathing.

Their church has come up with a particularly bizarre and mean-spirited way to make sure they are not full members. The Church's Constitution was amended in 1996 and 1997 to keep out of full membership anyone who does, and refuses to repent of, anything the Church's Confessions call sin. Anything! It's an amazing list, accumulated over a period of almost five centuries. "Anything the Confessions call sin" has to include practices like "unclean imaginations — wanton looks — immodest apparel . . . undue delay of marriage." It includes "the keeping of stews — always makes me

wonder what kind of stew — beef stew? Dinty Moore beef stew used to be a camping staple — not great but a sin of which I must repent in order to be a Presbyterian Deacon? Mercy! "Lascivious songs" — there go the R. B. Kelly fans, or Diana Krall's "Do It Again" — whatever that means. Lascivious books — there go the John Updike and Jane Smiley readers, and e.e. cummings . . . dancing — better not go to the Witherspoon party this year — stage plays — charging interest — there go the mortgage bankers — pictures — there they all go from Michelangelo to Salman's "Head of Christ."

The exact wording of this provision in our Constitution is:

> G-6.0106 Gifts and Requirements
> b. Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

The church conducted a very wide sweep in that amendment to its Constitution and in the process disqualified everyone I know from serving as an officer. Most conspicuously it specifically disqualified anyone who engages in sexual intimacy before marriage. At a time when 95% of the population has done just that — many with the person they eventually married, and aren't about to repent of — that's quite a stand to take. We're talking about a very, very small group of eligible officers and ministers. In terms of unreality — it is not unlike the Roman church's insistence that exercising responsible birth control is sinful — which something like 95% of the Catholics in America ignore. No one, of course, so far as I know, has been denied ordination or called before the courts of the church for dressing immodestly — or listening to suggestive songs — or keeping a secret print of Salman's "Head of Christ." The only persons being denied full inclusion in the church are homosexual persons who have decided they cannot and will not hide any longer. They were, of course, the target: everyone knows that now. And the Presbyterian Church has succeeded in wonderfully marginalizing them, excluding them, keeping itself pure and clean of their flawed leadership.

How many are there? How many faithful, qualified, gifted Presbyterians are on the margins of our church, or have left altogether, because of their church's official position? When I had the honor of serving as Moderator of the 208th General Assembly, I presided at the Assembly that debated and added G-6.0106 b to the Book of Order and sent it to the Presbyteries for ratification. For the record, as I watched it happen I realized that I was

seeing the successful conclusion to a carefully planned and well funded strategy that had been going on for several years. When I was running for Moderator I was invited to address and make my case before the leadership of the Presbyterian Coalition which I did and was received respectfully. The meeting was in Atlanta. I arrived early and was wandering around the hotel looking for the meeting and came to a door with a sign on it that said, "Presbyterian Coalition," so I opened the door to a Conference Room and walked in on what was clearly a strategy session for some kind of national campaign. All the Coalition Leaders were there. There was a flip chart, and large sheets of paper taped to the wall with the names of Presbyteries and contact persons. They were as surprised and uncomfortable to see me as I was to see them. There is nothing wrong with what they were doing. In fact they were using the system to accomplish their goal, and it worked and it was as I watched the debate on the Floor of the General Assembly that I remembered walking into that meeting, realizing we were going to lose, and thinking to myself — we need an organization like that.

During that year it was my responsibility to visit Presbyteries and to interpret what the Assembly did and what it meant. I was clear about my personal position, responsible to be the Moderator for the whole Church, nevertheless every time I spoke I said I personally thought this amendment, with its broad sweep and its targeting of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons for special exclusion was a mistake and that we ought to trust Sessions to make faithful decisions about calling and ordaining men and women to office in the church — and trusting Presbyteries to make responsible and faithful decisions about ordaining men and women to ministry. Some people called it "Local Option." I call it basic Presbyterianism. I did not argue the point but asked for charity and understanding and an effort to try to live together with our disagreement. Everywhere I went I encountered, as Moderators before and since have done, Presbyterians red-faced in anger, as Jack Rogers put it, about the issue and angry with me because of my position. But also, everywhere we went, we encountered Presbyterians with tears in their eyes, telling us about their sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters now marginalized by their Church, targeted by a specific Constitutional provision, unable to be full members of the Church of their parents, grandparents, great grandparents, not fully welcome in the Church of their fathers and mothers, the Church that baptized, confirmed and nurtured them.

We're going to get there. We're going to get there because our children are already there. Mine simply roll their eyes — and as I'm packing my bags for General Assembly say — "You're not still talking about that are you?" Business is already there. Education is there — even the military is almost there. We're going to get there.

We shall overcome. Of that I am absolutely sure. "The arc of the gospel" Walter Brueggemann says, "is inclusivity," always reaching out to include the excluded, to bring in the marginalized, to welcome at the banquet table all who want to be there. We shall overcome, of that I am sure, not in spite of the Bible but because we have taken the Bible as seriously as possible, finally read as the Reformers understood, the particulars of the Bible in light of the whole. We shall overcome because it has happened before as the Church was forced to reexamine in light of the whole of scripture, its absolute certainty that slavery was the will of God, that black people were inferior: its absolute certainty that women were to be submissive to men and unqualified for the offices and ministry of the Church. The Church can change and must change and will change because the arc of the Gospel is inclusion, not exclusion.

And because we know so much more about human sexuality, about genetics, about marriage and family and the nurturing of healthy children.

We will get there because our biblical scholars are hard at work — Brian Blount and Mark Achtemeir and Robert Brawley — examining the relevant passages: what they mean and don't mean, what the words meant in the original context and what they do not mean. Martin Marty's *CONTEXT* reminded us recently that the texts used to condemn homosexuality "are not answering the questions that 21st century protagonists on both sides want to ask. There are many 21st century questions that could not be asked in Biblical times, because the concepts that underlie them, that of homosexual orientation, did not then exist."

Change is already happening all around us. Not quickly and profoundly maybe — but it's there — Katherine Patrick, daughter of Deval Patrick, the Governor of Massachusetts, comes out and her father embraces her and he and his wife join her in the Gay Pride Parade. The Vice President and the President support the Vice President's lesbian daughter. Willow Creek, Chicago's famous Mega Church — holds a public dialogue — with Bill Hybels and members of Soul Force.

Change will happen not only when we become honest about the fact that while Jesus had some very specific things to say about divorce and remarriage and adultery — which we have become convinced, under the guidance of the spirit — needed to be reinterpreted for the 20th and 21st centuries, he had absolutely nothing to say about this.

Change will happen because it is his Church — not ours — not the Presbyterian Coalition's Church, not the Covenant Network's Church — not the Lay Committee's, nor the Witherspoon Society's Church — but the Church of Jesus Christ — the Christ whose arms are open to all, the Christ

who invites all who are heavily burdened to rest in him, the Christ who welcomes all.

Change will happen because of the witness of those two young Presbyterian parents and their brothers and sisters who still love their Church, but who will not feel at home in it, until it includes all of them.

The Church will change, I know, because I have been led to change my mind, by three good friends, faithful Presbyterians. I carried into adulthood the same stereotypes and prejudices as everyone else my age. I laughed at the same crude and cruel humor. The most progressive opinion I had was that we are dealing here with an aberration, a sickness — which we should meet with kindness until we figured out how to cure it. And then — a contemporary, a friend, tennis partner, businessman, husband, father, Presbyterian Elder, sat in my study over the period of several years, head in his hands, tears in his eyes. He had been to doctors, psychiatrists, marriage counselors, sex therapists. "I just want to be normal" he said. And after years of trying everything — he, finally, blessedly, concluded that he was normal. After a few years in a committed, faithful relationship, he died of AIDS.

David Hooker, computer programmer, member of Fourth Presbyterian Church, Elder, Trustee, as faithful a church officer as I've ever known: served on every Presbytery of Chicago committee he could, who loved his big family, loved his friends, loved the Presbyterian Church, never missed a Presbytery meeting, attended General Assembly, loved his life partner and who came into my office in the early 1990's and asked simply, "Why is this happening? Why is my church suddenly after all these years saying it doesn't want me?"

And Glen Fenema. I've told his story before, more than once. Forgive me if you've heard it. Glen and his family were members of a church in the South Suburbs of Chicago, which was clear that Glen and people like him were not welcome. Somehow Glen found us even though we are a long way from his home. He jumped in with both feet, wanted to learn as much about us as he could. Went on a church trip to Rome and in the process taught a group of straight-laced, unsuspecting Presbyterians that you can be human and Christian and gay. He was in church every Sunday and soon his parents, Bud and Gerry, life-long members of their suburban church, who were feeling marginalized because of their church's rejection of their son, were coming along. Glen was at that 1996 Assembly. After the vote that approved the amendment, I had met with leaders of both sides and agreed that whichever side lost the vote would have the opportunity to express itself. And so into the Assembly Hall came hundreds of gay and lesbian Presbyterians, their families and friends, wearing stoles, silently, some singing "We are Walking in the Light of God." I'll never forget standing on the platform, with Gay

Mothershed, Vice Moderator, trying to show my solidarity, and watching as Glen and David Hooker walked by and between them, Sue, their pastor's wife, my wife.

Glen had AIDS, but he continued to travel all the way down to Fourth Church for worship. Finally, he was so sick he had to move into a hospice facility near his family. Not long before he died I traveled down to call on him. He was his usual lively, witty self. It was the week before Easter and he inquired if I was ready for the "Big One." "What's the hardest part of this?" I asked. He said it was hardest, at night, when the visitors are all gone, and they turn down the lights, and it's quiet, and I'm alone with my sickness, my death. "You know what I do?" he asked. "I get out my tape player and ear phones and put in a tape of the services at our church. I must have 200 of them. I listen — to the prelude, the hymns. Sometimes I fall asleep during your sermons. I'll bet I'm not the only one who does" he said.

"That's how I fall asleep every night. Here in my bed, but also in my church." The Church of Jesus Christ — who never turned anyone away — the one whose love included all.

We'll get there . . . a church as generous and just as God's grace.